College and Career Readiness for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

All students should aim to leave high school ready for college and career. The National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC) definition of college and career readiness includes community readiness. Increasing numbers of students with significant cognitive disabilities are going to college programs, taking both credit and non-credit courses. See http://www.thinkcollegeindiana.org/index.php. Also, many of these students are getting long-term paid employment and living fulfilled lives in their communities. Every student should have the opportunity to work towards these goals.

Academic instruction designed for college and career readiness has value for every student. The learning process itself results in benefits because it improves critical thinking (e.g. comparing and applying information) and problem solving. The Indiana Academic Standards for English/Language Arts and Mathematics (2014) represent the academic content. These standards are designed for college and career success. NCSC is developing an alternate assessment and curriculum/instructional resources for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. The knowledge and skills associated with college and career readiness are closely related to the knowledge and skills that students with significant cognitive disabilities need to be successful in their community. Almost all 'functional skills' can be addressed while teaching academics. The most important 'functional' skills in the 21st century are:

Math *is important for telling time; scheduling; managing money; taking medication; planning and making meals; arranging transportation; shopping; attending college and being employed.*
ELA *is important for comparing information; making choices; self-advocacy; voting; traveling in the community; understanding books, movies, TV shows and songs; communicating with friends, family, support staff, medical personnel and co-workers; attending college and being*

- Communication skills;
- Math and English/Language Arts (E/LA), which includes reading and writing;
- Independent and team work skills;
- Age appropriate social skills; and
- Skills for identifying and requesting supports.

Students with significant cognitive disabilities are likely to continue to need supports to live and work as independently as possible throughout their adult lives after high school. However, the level of those supports is expected to be lower for students who are prepared for college, career and community. Every step closer to independence enriches the quality of life for these students.

The foundation of the NCSC model for achieving college and career readiness is communicative competence. With the help of early intervention services and other supports from the school system, students with significant cognitive disabilities should have effective communication systems in place by

kindergarten. These systems may involve assistive technology and/or forms of communication other than oral speech.

It is important for students to be able to express personal needs. However, they must also be able to share information, ideas, questions, and comments about daily life, the world in which they live and the academic content in their classes. For students who have not yet developed communicative competence, this must be an immediate objective. Communication at some level is possible and identifiable for all students regardless of functional 'level'. Communicative competence is the basis for learning and necessary for active community participation. It is essential that school staff work with families and students to develop a meaningful communication system for students to be used daily across settings. Communication needs must be addressed during the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process to ensure routine use of the communication system during instruction and assessment.

For more information on NCSC resources used in Indiana, contact Project SUCCESS: http://projectsuccessindiana.com/content/.

Some people believe that students with significant cognitive disabilities cannot successfully learn academic content. Studies show that this is a misperception. The education system should start with the assumption that every child can learn. This is called 'the least dangerous assumption' because exposing students to learning is not harmful, but keeping them from it is.

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